

Housatonic Environmental Action League, Inc.

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July 31, 2003

Alison Wolfe
MNG Center at SRA
2801 Clarendon Blvd., Suite 100
Arlington, VA 22201

RE: CD of Human Health Risk Assessment (HHRA), GE/Housatonic River Site, Rest of River,
DCN: GE-060603-ABPM, Volumes 1-5, 6 June 2003, US Environmental Protection Agency, US Army
Corps of Engineers

Sent via email

Dear Ms. Wolfe,

The Housatonic Environmental Action League, Inc. (HEAL) is a 501(c)(3) non-profit, broad-based grassroots environmental advocacy coalition that includes individuals and organizations from the tri-state area who are dedicated to the protection of the Housatonic River and its watershed. Our organization has been actively involved with the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) Housatonic River Project as it relates to General Electric's (GE) polychlorinated biphenyl (PCB) contamination of the river.

Please enter HEAL's comments into consideration by the Peer Review panel.

1. Despite numerous requests, HEAL was not provided with a hardcopy of this massive and critically important document. We have consistently voiced our concerns that not all NGOs who are involved with this site are treated equally. The Housatonic Valley Association (HVA) of Cornwall, CT is a private, non-profit organization that requires a fee for membership. GE-affiliated HVA is an EPA-designated information repository for this project. Prior to HEAL's comments to the Consent Decree in 2000, GE-affiliated HVA **was the only EPA information repository located along the Housatonic River in Connecticut**. GE-affiliated HVA accepts many thousands of dollars annually into their budget from, not only, GE, but multiple other corporate polluters, many of which are Responsible Parties (RP) at other contaminated sites.

At the HHRA presentation in CT we requested a hardcopy and was told by EPA that the documents were bulky and expensive to reproduce. We originally agreed to accept the CD version. It has proven to be unwieldy in its electronic format. Additionally, it requires vast amounts of computer memory space in order to even open multiple volumes simultaneously.

Representatives from EPA have repeatedly indicated, and have been recorded in minutes, notes and on videotape, that if HEAL (or any other individual or organization) requests a hardcopy of any document, they will be pleased to provide it. Without a hardcopy of this document, it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to wade through the thousands of electronic pages with any degree of comprehension or efficiency. HEAL is again requesting a hardcopy of both the HHRA and Ecological Risk Assessment (ERA) documents.

2. This study and the ERA study took researchers/scientists over five years to complete. It is unreasonable to expect that non-expert stakeholders can read and comment on these documents in only a few weeks' window. HEAL requests at least a 90-day public comment period for the ERA document.
3. Any presentation loses its audience after a 90 minute time period. The HHRA and ERA public presentations were many hours long and were well beyond the scope of the general lay public. We appreciate that the body of risk assessment is a difficult science. Despite that, stakeholders should not be required to possess advanced college degrees in order to understand the basic concepts and data in order to provide the framework for questions and comments. Public participation plans are ineffective if they remain in their written form and are not implemented in a fashion that embraces and reaches all interested stakeholders.
4. The Schaghticoke Indian Tribe of Kent, CT continues to be ignored in the process. The agencies persist with their platitudes such as: ***"...investigation of tribal practices in Connecticut is still underway..."*** and ***"...EPA is concerned about the consumption rates associated with the Schaghticoke Tribe, and will be discussing them further with the tribal members."*** As of July 30, 2003, according to Gail Harrison (Laughing Brook), Vice Chairman of the Schaghticoke Tribal Council, there has been no contact from any federal agency involved with the GE/Housatonic River site. How long will this patronizing and disrespect be allowed to continue against this First Nation people?
5. Members of the Schaghticoke Indian Tribe have shared with HEAL their traditional consumption practices dating back 40-50 years for the representatives we interviewed. One of their favorite and most frequent meal consisted of bottom feeding fish (catfish, bullhead, carp) being encased in a thick covering of river bottom mud, and being placed (ungutted) in an open fire to cook. This particular meal was consumed about 3-4 times each week. Additionally, they were subsistence consumers from the entire river system that included, among other things, eel (no longer found in the river), all fish, frog, turtle, squirrel, rabbit, raccoon, turkey, deer, goose, duck, snake, mushrooms, greenery and multiple types of tree barks. They shared that all parts of the animals were consumed including organs (e.g. liver) and fats. Of course these consumption practices included children, pregnant women, breastfeeding women and women of childbearing age. These practices have been recently curtailed (? 4-5 years ago), with enhanced reduction of certain species since HEAL contacted them in 1999. We could find no reference in the HHRA to associated human health risks pertaining to stress related to no longer being able to practice their traditional food practices and not able to fully practice their religion.
6. In addition to eel, are there any other species that are no longer found in the system but contributed to the current body burdens in humans?
7. There have been no duck sampling in CT despite the duck tissue in MA found to have the highest levels of PCBs ever found in living tissue. HEAL has been told repeatedly that the contaminated duck are "Massachusetts ducks", and that the CT Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) and CT Department of Public Health (DPH) have no plans to add waterfowl to consumption advisories. HEAL requests additional waterfowl sampling in CT to determine risk and potentially adding species to advisories.
8. Frog and turtle are not included in the CT consumption advisories. Representatives of DEP have repeatedly stated at meetings that their field surveys show no one eats frog or turtle in the CT section of the river. HEAL requests further sampling of frog and turtle in CT to determine risk and potentially adding species to advisories.
9. In a Hartford Courant newspaper article (*Health threat posed by some fish in state*) of January 8, 1993 says about the Housatonic River: ***"I know that some refugees fish here [in Connecticut], but I hope that they don't fish in that particular river," said Valyna Loeu, a social worker at the West Hartford-based refugee assistance organization.*** and ***"Several years ago, environmental officials surveyed***

Housatonic anglers and found that 54 percent of those using bait were eating their catch.” HEAL regularly observes people of color and Asian anglers leaving the river with their catch in-hand. Inadequate angler surveys are represented in the HHRA for both MA and CT.

10. Dr. Deborah Rice and Dr. Susan Schantz have clearly demonstrated reproducible adverse effects to living tissue when exposed to PCBs in levels as low as parts per trillion. We believe that the reduction of acceptable threshold levels deserves consideration.
11. Inadequate attention to the volatilization of PCBs throughout the river system in light of compelling research that indicates this as a definite pathway of exposure.
12. HEAL is aware of rumors that Asian populations are selling Housatonic River fish in markets.
13. Tree bark uptake of PCBs research has not been considered. Consideration needs to be addressed for those that harvest tree bark for human consumption and to the animals that include tree bark in their diets.
14. Candlewood Lake was created from Housatonic River water, and continues to be stocked with river water for hydroelectric generation. Inadequate sediment, water column and biota sampling has occurred in the lake.
15. Canals, locks, diversionary pools, channels and river bypasses in the CT section have not been adequately sampled.
16. Most data for the CT section of Rest of River reaches is historic and generated by GE. We do not trust GE’s data and do not believe the RP’s data should be allowed in the absence of parallel sampling by EPA. (A glaring example of GE’s data is found in the Stewart Report that states PCB levels in sediments ranged from less than 1 to 210 ppm (dry weight) and appeared to be confined to the upper 12 inches of the sediment. It went on to estimate that a total of 39,000 pounds of PCBs remained in the river system.)
17. For years HEAL has called for additional baseline testing of the floodplain in CT and additional deep core sampling behind the CT dams to determine the full extent of PCB contamination and to clearly define any hot spots in the system.
18. There has been no apparent consideration for PCB deposits behind defunct dams segments that are hidden under water.
19. A new bridge is proposed for Lake Zoar (Stevenson Dam). Not only has no sampling occurred behind Stevenson Dam, there is no coordination between agencies on construction projects that will disturb and resuspend PCB contaminated sediment.
20. No human adipose samples, thyroid function studies or human breast milk analysis. No epidemiological retrospectives, birth record data, tumor registry or death record reviews.
21. Appears to be inadequate consideration of existing PCB body burdens combined with ongoing exposure through living, recreating or occupationally.
22. Why were existing CT floodplain maps not utilized in identifying and sampling?
23. Attached is Northeast Generation Company’s 1999 comment letter to the Consent Decree related to the ongoing FERC relicensing process of their hydroelectric facilities in CT and their concerns surrounding responsibility for existing PCBs behind the dams. ***“However, high levels of PCBs still remain in sediments at each dam along the Housatonic River.”***

24. HEAL believe that EPA must not evaluate risk to humans exposed to PCBs in the absence of considering the other toxins found in the river system, particularly but not exclusively, dioxin and dioxin-like compounds.
25. HEAL along with the Housatonic River Initiative, Inc. organized the first PCB Congress that took place in March, 2003. The Declaration of Independence from PCBs was written, ratified and signed by numerous individuals and organizations dealing with PCB-contaminated sites. We encourage the PR panel and EPA to read and incorporated the Declaration into their recommendations and considerations.
26. The fiction continues that areas left untouched will improve naturally. PCBs do not degrade naturally and will persist for centuries. Dispersal by air will harm people in northern latitudes (Alaska, northern Canada, Scandinavia, etc.) where PCBs hit the cold air, settle out and concentrate in local fish and meat. This is not “recovery” but merely a shifting of health risks to people in other regions.
27. “When an activity raises threats of harm to the environment or human health, precautionary measures should be taken even if some cause and effect relationships are not fully established scientifically. In this context the proponent of an activity, rather than the public, should bear the burden of proof. The process of applying the Precautionary Principle must be open, informed and democratic and must include potentially affected parties.” (Taken from the Wingspread Consensus Statement on the Precautionary Principle, 1998.
HEAL fully supports and endorses the Precautionary Principle and urges the PR panel to incorporate it into their discussions and findings.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this document.

Sincerely,

Judith A. Herkimer, Director

c.c. - Bryan Olson, EPA

attachment